DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 998 SO 029 460

AUTHOR Wraga, William G.
TITLE Democratic Leadership in the Classroom: Theory into Practice.
PUB DATE 1998-08-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Czech National Civic Education Conference (Olomouc, Czech Republic, August 24-25, 1998).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Citizenship Education; Civics; Class Activities; Classroom Communication; Classroom Environment; Classroom Techniques; Democratic Values; Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership; *Student Development; *Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Democratic Communication; *Educational Leadership; *Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that for students to become accustomed to democratic habits of thought and conduct, they must continually practice them throughout the course of their school career. The daily interaction between the teacher and the pupil can influence the formation of attitudes and habits essential to democratic citizenship. For teachers, the challenge lies in conducting the classroom as democratically as possible within the parameters of the authority that the state exercises over students to meet this challenge, the teacher must practice democratic leadership in the classroom. For example, the teacher can involve students in devising classroom rules, perhaps in the form of writing and signing a classroom constitution and can provide students some choice in assignments related to particular purposes or subject matter. In a problem-or-issues-focused unit the teacher can allow for student discretion in the matter of selecting problems to study. If relations among students or between teachers and students are not going well, the teacher can solicit student suggestions about the source and possible solution to the problem. The democratic classroom provides structured conditions for students to develop habits of reflective thinking that enable them to make informed decisions about pending personal and social actions. In a democratic classroom, all students are entitled to equal and fair treatment and to equal opportunity to contribute to group decisions and class discussions. Commitment to the principle of individualism requires that the democratic classroom experience dignifies the integrity of the individual learner. The teacher cultivates self control and self discipline in students by providing them structured opportunities to exercise these habits. Contains 11 references. (BT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 427 998

DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP IN THE CLASSROOM:

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

William G. Wraga

Assistant Professor

University of Georgia

Department of Educational Leadership

G-10 Aderhold hall

Athens, GA 30602 USA

Tel. 706-542-4166

wwraga@sage.coe.uga.edu

http://www.coe.uga.edu/leadership/Faculty/wraga

SO 029 460

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

William G. Wraga

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Presented at the
Czech National Civic Education Conference
Olomouc, Czech Republic
August 24 and 25, 1998

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP IN THE CLASSROOM: THEORY INTO PRACTICE

"What happens in the classroom will, in the final analysis, reveal how deep are the roots of our democratic commitment." (Hullfish 1960, p. 44)

Education for democracy begins in the classroom. For the student's part, acquiring a knowledge and understanding of democratic forms of government, of the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy, and of conventional avenues of citizen participation, such as voting, are necessary but insufficient elements of democratic citizenship education. For the teacher's part, the dutiful implementation of lessons in the national civics curriculum alone will likely fall short of achieving the lofty goal of educating democratic citizens. In order for students to become accustomed to democratic habits of thought and conduct, they must continually practice them throughout the course of their school career. The daily interaction between the teacher and the pupil can exert a profound influence on the formation of attitudes and habits essential to democratic citizenship.

The necessary limitations to practicing democracy in the classroom are obvious: the state sanctions schools and teachers to exercise authority over students. Further, students are immature developing beings; they cannot make all decisions about their education because they simply and literally do not know any better. The school and the teacher obviously have the authority and responsibility to guide students along the road to learning. Yet, if education is to be consistent with the ideals of democracy, classroom experiences must manifest democratic ideals to the greatest extent possible. For teachers, the challenge lies

in conducting the classroom as democratically as possible within the parameters of the authority that the state exercises over students. To meet this challenge, the teacher must practice democratic leadership in the classroom.

Democratic leadership in the classroom is a matter of exercising educational authority over students in ways that are consistent with basic ideals of democracy. Before exploring ways to make classrooms democratic, let us briefly examine the fundamental theory of democracy upon which they rest.

A Theory of Democracy

The American philosopher-educator John Dewey articulated the relationship between school practice and democratic theory in his essay "Democracy and Educational Administration." Although in this essay Dewey (1935) was more concerned with how principals run schools than with how teachers run classrooms, his brief explanation of the theory of democracy is useful to us today.

Dewey (1935) asserted that democracy is necessarily more than simply a form of government, that democracy is a way of life that requires the participation of all of its members. The foundation of democracy is "faith in human intelligence, and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience" (p. 219). Dewey noted that authoritarian forms of government are based upon the belief that the intelligence needed for leadership was enjoyed by only a select, superior few members of society. He suggested that this erroneous belief survives in the modern world from pre-democratic times. As he put it,

> After democratic political institutions were nominally established, beliefs and ways of looking at life and of acting that originated when men and women were externally controlled and subjected to arbitrary power,

> persisted in the family, the church, business and the school, and experience shows that as long as they persist there, political democracy is not secure. (Dewey 1937, p. 219)

Dewey rejected this belief in narrowly distributed intelligence as fallacious and destructive to democracy.

Dewey (1935) argued that democracy is premised on the idea that no select group is wise enough to rule others without their consent. He maintained that "it is the democratic faith that [intelligence] is sufficiently general so that each individual has something to contribute [the value of which] can be assessed only as it enters into the final pooled intelligence constituted by the contributions of all" (p. 220). Equality means that each individual has the right to have input to the resolution of common social problems. While not all of such input will actually solve the problem, the combination of ideas from all individuals will result in greater quantity and quality of ideas to choose from and increase the likelihood that problems will be resolved.

Dewey (1935) also observed that democracy is often associated merely with freedom of action. He insisted, however, that freedom of action is another necessary but insufficient condition for democracy. As he put it, "Unless freedom of action [is guided by] intelligence, its manifestation is almost sure to result in confusion and disorder" (p. 220). For Dewey, more fundamental than freedom of action was a democratic commitment to freedom of intelligence. Only as citizens are able to engage in the free and open exchange of ideas and information can cooperative problem solving flourish.

In summary, according to Dewey, democracy requires that all members of society enjoy equal opportunity to contribute to the resolution of common social

problems. Democracy is premised upon the idea that intelligence is sufficiently distributed so that individual citizens are able to direct the course of their experience in thoughtful, enlightened ways. That is, rather than having some external authority make decisions on their behalf, individuals are capable of thinking, and ultimately acting, for themselves.

Democratic Classroom Practices

What does this theory of democracy mean for the classroom? How can we as teachers make classrooms increasingly democratic? Let us answer these questions by examining the implications of basic principles of democracy for democratic classroom practice.[1]

Basic principles of democracy serve as ideals to guide actions in democratic classrooms, as they should in all democratic communities. The following comprise the core of democratic principles: popular sovereignty; freedom; equality; individualism; and social responsibility. As ideals, these principles are difficult to achieve fully. Democratic living involves a continual struggle to act in ways as consistent with these ideals as possible. As a place where social "conditions are somewhat controlled and simplified, in contrast to those in life," the classroom provides many opportunities for developing democratic forms of conduct consistent with these in students (Hullfish 1960, p. 13). What are the implications of these ideals for classroom practice?

Popular sovereignty

Popular sovereignty is often simplistically associated with making group decisions by "taking a vote." As Dewey's discussion of democratic theory

[1] To accomplish this task, the following discussion will draw from the work of progressive educators who, during the first half of this century, wrote extensively about the democratic classroom and school. Despite

indicates, it is more than that. In a democratic classroom, popular sovereignty means that, to the greatest extent possible, students participate in decisions that affect them. As a democratic leader, the teacher provides students with appropriate opportunities to contribute to group decisions.

Even within the authority that the state, the school, and the teacher exercise over students opportunities for student input to their education exist. These opportunities range from procedural to educational matters. In the democratic classroom, for instance, the teacher can involve students in devising classroom rules, perhaps in the form of writing and signing a classroom constitution (Zapf 1959, ch. 4). The teacher can provide students some choice in assignments related to particular purposes or subject matter. In a problem- or issue-focused unit the teacher can allow for student discretion in the matter of selecting problems to study. If relations among students or between the teacher and students are not going well, the teacher can solicit student suggestions about the source and possible solution to the problem.

Experience with democratic education suggests that, since students (and teachers) are accustomed to authoritarian classroom arrangements, a process of gradually introducing them to increasingly substantive forms of participation is probably the best approach (Educational Policies Commission 1940, p. 128; Reavis 1941, pp. 106-107). Under such circumstances, students learn that, as "leadership passes from person to person as each has a contribution to make," in "a democracy, leadership [often is] a function, not a person" (Courtis 1945, p. 71). With such opportunities, students not only learn the benefits and processes of popular sovereignty, but they also learn that in democratic communities

---

the recent renewed interest in democratic forms of schooling in the United States, this historic literature is

citizens ideally work in collaboration with authorities to solve problems rather than submit passively to externally imposed rules.

Freedom

Freedom in educational settings often is simplistically associated with a permissive attitude that focuses on narrow interests and whims in which children and youth are often inclined to indulge, with an attitude that results in lack of discipline. Such permissiveness is, in fact, inimical to the democratic classroom.

Recall Dewey's position that, in a democracy, freedom is inextricably connected to thinking. Freedom of action is guided by freedom of thought. Civil rights, such as freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly, ensure that citizens have at their disposal ways to communicate with one another. These rights are premised upon the reality that in order for a people to act as a check against the powers-that-be--as a fourth branch of the government--they must be free to think and talk about problems and issues of the day. Such reflection and communication serve as prerequisites for informed, intelligent democratic action. Self-directed action is the goal (Courtis 1945, pp. 12. 13).

The democratic classroom, therefore, provides structured conditions for students to develop habits of reflective thinking that enable them to make informed decisions about pending personal and social actions. Opportunities for such decisions include those just mentioned in regard to popular sovereignty. Such decisions range from problems of relations between and among classmates, to group decisions faced by the class and even by the school, to pressing social problems of the day. When social problems are studied, students do not simply memorize information, but learn how to use subject matter to understand societal

---

rarely acknowledged by current advocates.

problems and issues. In any decision-making opportunity, students learn how to examine all sides of a problem or issue and how to weigh all available evidence before making a decision.

When teachers enable students to acquire these kinds of competencies, students will develop the ability to engage in the free and open exchange of ideas and information that is essential to a democratic society. A democratic classroom, in short, promotes freedom by engaging students in disciplined examination of multiple sides of problematic situations that require decision-making. A democratic classroom is a model of freedom of intelligence.

Equality

In a democratic classroom, all students are entitled to equal and fair treatment and to equal opportunity to contribute to group decisions and class discussions. Students learn through experience that in a democracy each individual has the right to have input to the resolution of common problems. Students learn skills for contributing to group deliberation and for arriving at group decisions. In this process, no student should suffer "because, in his effort to deal with ideas, he differs with either his teacher or his classmates." When a students differs, "the teacher is presented with a teaching opportunity," an opportunity for students to test their ideas against evidence and action (Hullfish 1960, p. 12). In a democratic classroom the teacher ensures that all students have equal access to the curriculum. The teacher expects all students to learn the material and provides individual instruction necessary for students to meet that expectation. In a democratic classroom, small-group discussions and work sessions allow students greater opportunities to participate and teachers greater opportunity to work individually with students.

Individualism

Commitment to the principle of individualism requires that the democratic classroom experience dignifies the integrity of the individual learner. When the class needs to make a group decision about a common concern or problem, all students have the opportunity to provide input to the discussion and to engage in the resolution of the problem. In this way, students live the experience of having their ideas tested against fact and action, rather than merely studying it. Classroom discipline is designed to develop in students increasing capacity for self-control, for self-directed action. The teacher cultivates self-control and self-discipline in students by providing them structured opportunities to exercise self-discipline.

Although the democratic classroom does not condone the excessive indulgence in narrow interests and whims, it does begin by taking student interests seriously. Student interests are regarded as points of departure for further learning. This means, for example, that students will have opportunities to select common social problems to study. The democratic classroom is characterized by a climate that is open to the existence of different political and ethical perspectives and opinions. In such a democratic climate, students are free to express, or not to ~~ex~~press, their opinion on an issue.

Most important, the democratic classroom protects the individual from propaganda and indoctrination. Indoctrination "means . . . the denial of not merely the principle of respect for ideas but the principle of respect for persons as well" (Hullfish 1960, p. 11). The desire to indoctrinate others reveals a lack of faith in the intelligence of the citizen. Progressive educator Boyd Bode described

the appropriate approach to indoctrination in the democratic classroom in this way:

> It is indoctrination in the belief that the individual has the right to a choice of beliefs. Stated negatively and in terms of a paradox, it is indoctrination in the belief that indoctrination of beliefs is wrong. (Bode 1935, p. 22)

In a democratic classroom, individualism is promoted through the teaching of critical thinking skills that students can use to protect themselves from propaganda.

Social Responsibility

In a democracy, individualism is complemented and tempered by a commitment to social responsibility. Education in a democracy aims " to cultivate in each pupil an independent social outlook [which] gives promise of providing a basis for effective participation in giving direction to social change" (Bode 1935, p. 22). In a democratic classroom, social responsibility is promoted when students participate in resolving classroom problems and making classroom decisions. Students learn how to conduct themselves in a group setting, how to use parliamentary procedures, how to engage in social action beyond the classroom and the school. They learn how to contribute to the life of the small group, of the classroom, of the school, of the neighborhood, of the wider society and nation. As students use subject matter to understand social institutions and social problems, they discover the social significance of knowledge (Hullfish 1960).

Toward Democratic Classrooms

Remember that, "Democracy is not a completed entity" (Hullfish 1960, p. 4). In most cases, becoming a democratic leader and making a classroom democratic will not happen overnight. Instead, the gradual implementation of

democratic practices through a process of planned experimentation is a productive path to follow (Courtis 1945). Study the problem. Consider the particular students with whom you work. Plan to begin small. Seek input from supportive colleagues. Try out some practices. Evaluate practices continually. Adjust practices accordingly. Introduce additional and increasingly sophisticated practices. Past efforts to enact democratic education, such as those referenced here, can be invaluable sources of information and insights. Current efforts are instructive, too (Apple and Beane 1995; Evans and Saxe 1996). By guiding classroom practices with democratic ideals, "democratic qualities will be learned as concomitants of learning whatever is being specifically studied." In this way, "Lectures on democracy will be replaced by democratic living," and the meaning of democracy "will emerge through the character of the living done in the classroom" (Hullfish 1945, p. 43). The teacher will serve as a democratic leader.

References

Apple, M. W., and J. A. Beane, eds. 1995. Democratic Schools. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Bode, B. H. 1935. Education and social reconstruction. The Social Frontier 1, (4): 18-22.

Courtis, S. A. 1945. The Democratization of Classroom Procedures. Detroit, MI: Detroit Regional Conference of the Michigan Education Association.

Dewey, J. 1937/1991. Democracy and educational administration. In J. A. Boydston, ed., The Latter Works, Vol. 11. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, pp. 217-225.

Educational Policies Commission. 1940. Learning the Ways of Democracy: A Case Book of Civic Education. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Evans, R. W., and D. W. Saxe, eds. 1996. Handbook on Teaching Social Issues. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies.

Hopkins, L. T. 1941. Interaction: The Democratic Process. Boston: D.C. Heath.

Hullfish, H. G. 1960. Toward a Democratic Education. Columbus, OH: The College of Education, The Ohio State University.

National Society for the Study of Education. 1926. The Foundations of Curriculum-Making. 26th Yearbook, Part II. Bloomington, IL: Public School Publishing Co.

Reavis, W. C. 1941. Democratic ideals in teaching and administration. In Newton Edwards, ed. Education in a Democracy (pp. 94-110). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Zapf, R. M. 1959. Democratic Processes in the Classroom. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.